

Research on Technology-Mediated Task-based Teaching Approach in Oral English Teaching based on the Chinese Context

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Abstract

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) offers great pedagogical value in oral English teaching. However, various challenges have been encountered in China, a common phenomenon of silence in speaking classes is still serious. Thus, implementing TBLT may not effectively foster language processing and conversational interaction in China. However, with the application and development of network technology, many scholars have conducted research on this, proving that combining Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) with technology can significantly help learners' oral input and output, and provide rich ways to enhance learners' speaking performance. Therefore, this study aims to synthesis TBLT approach and technology to explore technology-mediated task-based language teaching (TMTBLT) application to strengthen oral English teaching in China.

Keywords

Technology-mediated Task-based Language Teaching; Oral English Teaching; Teaching Strategy.

1. Introduction

TBLT has been attractive to scholars in the domain of SLA for several decades and widely adopted by educators teaching English as foreign language (EFL). As the core of task-based teaching is communicative tasks, emphasizing the meaning and use of language, TBLT plays an important role in the practice of oral English teaching.

For oral English teaching in China, many empirical studies have shown that task-based teaching has a positive impact on it. Among them, Zhang and Yang (2016) receptively discussed the application of task-based teaching method in oral English teaching in colleges and middle schools, proving that Task-based teaching can effectively address the problem of the silence in oral English class and promote students' classroom participation. In addition, task-based teaching approach can improve students' oral English skills and their speaking performance by creating an authentic language situation (Pang, 2019). It is undeniable that TBLT provides great value in oral English teaching, but Chinese English teachers still face many difficulties in task-based teaching, such as: typically large classroom size in many EFL settings (Hwang et al., 2016), single task design and limited teaching time, etc. These problems greatly limit learners' active participation in tasks.

With the development of network technology, technology-mediated task-based language teaching (TMTBLT) has become a new and important research field in applied linguistics. Many foreign scholars have conducted research on this, proving that the combination of task-based teaching methods and technology provides the ways of promoting commutative tasks successfully (Doughty & Long, 2003). However, teachers have not paid enough attention to the integration of technology and pedagogy, and the problem in oral teaching is still prominent. In order to fill this gap, the purpose of this study is to synthesis the TBLT approach and technology

to explore a technology-mediated TBLT environment to enhance oral English teaching based on Chinese context.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Task-based Language Teaching

2.1.1. The Definition of Task

When it comes to TBLT, scholars widely believe that tasks are a core component of task-based language teaching. Therefore, various definitions of 'task' have been given by scholars, and each has its focus.

Long (1985) defined tasks as obligatory or remunerative work and developed a theoretical model of task-based language teaching from the perspective of second language acquisition, later known as interactive revision theory. Then, D. Nunan (1989) divides tasks into two types: real-world communicative tasks and pedagogic communicative tasks. It requires students to understand, practice and communicate in the target language. In this process, students' attention is mainly focused on the linguistic meaning rather than the form. Later, Willis (1996) explains, 'task' denotes to a goal-oriented activity in which learners use all available language resources to address a problem, such as playing a game or solving a puzzle. Compared to Willis, Ellis' interpretation of "task" bears some similarities to Willis' definition. According to Ellis (2003), a language teaching activity can be called a task only when it fulfills the criteria: (1) It is meaning-focused; (2) The information or meaning gap should exist; (3) Learners need to draw upon their language repertoire to complete the activity; (4) A well-defined outcome of the activity (not the use of language) should be stated. However, no matter which definition scholars favour, it is argued that the main focus in TBLT is meaning and learners can feel free to engage in meaningful, goal-oriented communication.

2.1.2. The Definition of Task-based Language Teaching

Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) is based on the idea of "learning by doing" or "experiential learning" (Dewey, 1997), which means learners acquire a language by doing things in real-life situations, rather than just understanding it. Besides, TBLT has a weak version and a strong version. Weak TBLT (also referred to as task-supported language teaching) allows learners to use tasks as a means of analyzing language, whereas strong TBLT advocates subconscious learning only through tasks. At present, the "task-based" teaching methods used in Chinese teaching are mostly "weak task-based" teaching mode (Feng, Tang, 2004).

With the deepening research of the theory and practice of task-based teaching, the design and implementation methods of tasks have been further improved. Prabhu (1987) initially proposed the TBLT model, which consisted of three stages: pre-task (a preparatory activity), task cycle (a meaning-focused or interactive process action), and post-task (an activity attending to form). Later, Willis (1996) further developed this model by introducing a framework that emphasized language teaching around a task, with three main stages: pre-task (introduction to the topic and task, preparation), task cycle (task performance, planning, and report), and language focus (language analysis and practice). To sum up, task-based language teaching has been attractive to scholars in the domain of SLA for several decades and widely adopted by educators teaching English as foreign language (EFL).

2.2. Technology-Mediated Task-based Language Teaching

2.2.1. The Definition of Technology-Mediated TBLT

The definition of Technology-mediated TBLT, in general, can be viewed as reciprocal elements between technology and TBLT which constitute a unique approach (González-Lloret, Ortega, 2014). In particular, TBLT as a method of teaching languages can be considerably improved by

embracing new technology, and TBLT can offer a programmatic basis for the successful application of new technologies in language education. Similar to traditional TBLT, Technology-mediated TBLT can be categorized into weak and strong forms. Weak form of technology-mediated TBLT "would rely on technology as a pedagogical tool to extend traditional paper and pencil pedagogical tasks and traditional learning activities" (Payant, Bright, 2017). In this form, tasks are similar to traditional ones, but technology is used to and aid the tasks. A strong form of technology-mediated TBLT "seeks to integrate TBLT within virtual learning spaces" (Payant, Bright, 2017). This form takes into account the technology-mediated environment, which includes correspondence via e-mail, reading and writing on the web, and online interaction with other students.

2.2.2. The Framework of Technology-Mediated TBLT

In order to address the components that make up a technique, Richards and Rodgers (2008) suggested a new model based on Anthony's model. The following model states that "a method is theoretically related to an approach, is organizationally determined by a design, and is practically realized in procedure" (Richards, Rodgers, 2008).

More specifically, technology-mediated TBLT on a design level employs the same strategy as TBLT but with added information context. According to Richards and Rodgers (2008), language is seen "primarily as a means of making meaning". On a design level, technology-mediated TBLT extends the physical boundary into virtual space, where different kinds of educational and pedagogical practices are used. On a procedural level, the three steps of pre-task, task (cycle), and post-task are primarily the emphasis. The pre-task stresses how the task is introduced and presented. The task cycle then discusses how the task is handled and finished with the teacher's assistance. The post-task demonstrates how the teacher extends students' reflective learning in class or thereafter and provides feedback.

2.2.3. The Feature of Technology-Mediated TBLT Task

Task in both traditional TBLT and technology-mediated TBLT shares a series of identical features with different expression. In terms of TBLT, a typical "task" is defined by four characteristics. To begin with, a task should primarily focus on meaning as the expression conveyed "the semantic and pragmatic meaning of utterance" (Ellis, 2009). After that, a task should have "information gap", and after the completion of task a "clearly defined outcome other than the use of language" (Ellis, 2009) should be expected and measured. As for learners, they are anticipated to wield their intellectual capability to exploit any linguistic and non-linguistic resources available.

The technology-mediated task, however, has five key characteristics despite all the common elements that make up a "task": it primarily emphasizes meaning, is goal-oriented, learner-centered, draws on real-world language use processes, integrates form-function-meaning, and involves reflective learning (González-Lloret, Ortega, 2014). The task can be completed in a technologically enhanced environment if it has such attributes.

2.3. Technology-Mediated Task-based Language in Oral English Teaching

Many academics have demonstrated the efficiency of technology-mediated TBLT in a variety of settings. For the application of technology-mediated TBLT in the process of oral English, foreign scholars have done more related research on this. Among them, Peterson (2009) in early time examines technology-mediated activities can encourage engagement throughout the process as well as co-constructive new rules and interactional resources to produce target language output.

However, In the research of oral English teaching in China, the technology-mediated TBLT is relatively late compared with foreign countries, but it has also attracted the attention of scholars. Initially, Yu (2016) implemented the application of task-based teaching mediated by

technology in the process of oral English, and found that teachers can obtain students' feedback information in a timely and accurate manner and provide strong guidance, so as to achieve effective oral English teaching. According to Yu (2016), it can be proved that TMTBLT has value and the ability to be applied in a Chinese context.

Therefore, it is essential to use technology into the teaching of oral English in Chinese classroom. However, TMTBLT oral English teaching in the network environment is also facing transformation and challenges. The problems of how to optimize and utilize technology-mediated resources is still faced by English teachers.

3. Implementing Technology-Mediated TBLT in Oral English Teaching

3.1. Blending Technologies into Communicative Tasks

In oral English teaching, teachers should consider the available technology-mediated resources, and combine tasks with technology to improve students' learning interest and experience, so as to promote the effectiveness of teaching process. At the same time, by applying technology in oral language teaching, teachers can better detect and correct students' accuracy and fluency in speaking, thereby helping students improve their oral language proficiency.

Specifically, in task-based teaching, teachers can use technological tools (such as video conversations, voice recorders, etc.) to create realistic task scenarios and form related communication task groups, thus guiding students to complete communication tasks effectively. Moreover, evaluation is also essential in the post-task cycle. Teachers can adopt technology-mediated evaluation tools (such as recording tools) to effectively improve learners' performance in speaking, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of oral teaching in large-class teaching environments.

3.2. Providing Adequate Training for Learners

Although operating a new technology in the process of oral teaching has authenticity and the higher degree of freedom, a certain degree of complexity is often involved in the process of learning. Thus, learners will be perplexed if instructions are unclear and teacher scaffolding is inadequate. Therefore, in the implementation of TMTBLT teaching, teachers should provide training, guidance and feedback to learners in the pre-task, during-task and post-task stages to ensure that learners can fully understand the task, and help students arrange rationally in each task circle to achieve the efficiency of task implementation and communication.

Besides, a training program that is effective should encompass micro-level features whereby students are guided to develop particular meta-cognitive strategies (e.g., paying attention to linguistic features during text-based chatting), cognitive strategies (e.g., how to discuss meaning and form in online chatting), social strategies (e.g., building rapport with others and maintaining group dynamics in the online environment), and affective strategies (e.g., keeping themselves motivated and engaged without being physically close to the teacher or peers).

3.3. Selecting Technological Platform for Oral English Teaching

Implementing technology-mediated task-based teaching should select and apply online websites, social media and mobile learning applications to ensure that learners engage in meaningful, goal-oriented communication. At present, Chinese teachers have begun to use WeChat voice dialogue, English fun dubbing, Fluent Speaking English and other technological affordances as post-task achievement tests in oral teaching. However, for creating more authentic situations, teachers had better develop and choose more technology platforms to provide students with authentic and rich communicative tasks.

It should be noted that tasks in such form are the same as traditional tasks only through technology-tool aid display. The technology should be appropriate so that it does not divert the

learners' attention from learning the target language. Therefore, teachers are recommended to implement a weak form of technology-mediated communicative tasks by using free technological tools and incorporating technology in small learning tasks. (Payant, Bright, 2017).

4. Conclusion

This study synthesizes the TBLT approach and technology-mediated resources to explore a technology-mediated task-based language teaching (TMTBLT) ways to enhance oral English teaching based on Chinese context. In the network environment, teachers and students can search for the resources they want according to the needs of the communicative task, which can fully mobilize the enthusiasm of teachers and students in communication. But as Ellis (2009) mentioned, the technology-mediated task-based teaching in Asia is still in the exploratory stage, thus domestic scholars and front-line teachers need to continue practicing and improving in oral language teaching research.

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